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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S AFFAIRS MINISTER AL-SAMARA'E RESIGNS

REF: BAGHDAD 2996

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Minister of State for Women's Affairs (MoSWA) Dr. Nawal Hamed Majid Al-Samara'e unexpectedly unannounced at a February 5 meeting with Poloff and Strateff CJ9 Women's Initiative Team Lead Officer that she had resigned from her post the same day. In a voice that belied anger and frustration, Al-Samara'e said that MoSWA is a ministry in name only, that she had no budget or staff and that she was not interested in a job that consists of "a chair, a name plate for her desk, cars, and making statements to the press."

GOI Has Its Priorities Wrong

¶2. (C) Al-Samara'e, a Sunni Arab, was a Council of Representatives (CoR) member for the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, Tawafuq) until July 2008, when Tawafuq returned to the Maliki government and the IIP appointed her as MoSWA. Since then she had been working on implementing a national literacy program for women, in coordination with the Ministry of Education (reftel). (Note: The GOI currently has no national women's development or literacy programs. To the extent they exist, literacy programs for women are run by NGOs. End note.) Al-Samara'e also wanted to open MoSWA branches in every governorate, to serve the health and education needs of women in the provinces, particularly widows. Al-Samar'e commented that the current government was obviously not serious about helping Iraqi women and children, does not understand or care that Iraq's future generations depend on the education and health of its mothers and children now. She highlighted the plight of three million widows, who often suffer extreme economic hardship. (Comment: The figure most often cited by women's activists and the media for the number of widows in Iraq is one million. In this meeting, Al-Samara'e did not mention female detainees in GOI and USG custody, a topic she often raises in conversation and for whom she has also publicly expressed concern. End note.)

A Ministry in Name Only

¶3. (C) According to Al-Samara'e, MoSWA's monthly operating budget was reduced from 7m Iraqi Dinars (ID) to 1.5m ID (i.e., from approximately \$7,000 to \$1,200) since oil prices dropped. When Poloff suggested that Prime Minister Maliki may not accept her resignation and that she might consider setting some conditions in return for her staying on, Al-Samara'e smiled, saying she was certain he would accept it; it would be easy enough to find another woman who would be satisfied with a big salary, cars and the other trappings of a minister's job.

What Next?

14. (C) Al-Samara'e said that she plans to return to her native Mosul for the time being, but might consider rejoining the parliament for the IIP, pointing out that "one can accomplish something there." She added that the parliament needs strong women; most female members of parliament are puppets of their parties and do nothing to serve the needs of Iraqi women. Al-Samara'e is in favor of a 25% quota for women in the parliament, but believes that it would likely be filled by women chosen to do their parties' bidding. Commenting on Iraqi politics, al-Samara'e said she is fed up with all religious parties, Sunni and Shia, since they accomplish nothing for the people and spend the country's resources fighting each other. Al-Samara'e emphasized that she would support a secular government and that her conservative Islamic dress and headcovering were personal matters and had nothing to do with how the country should be governed.

15. (C) Comment: Since her appointment in July 2008, Al-Samara'e has been criticized by women's activists, particularly those of a visibly Western orientation, who tended to dismiss her because of her traditional dress and presumed conservative outlook. Although this criticism was not justified, it is true that Al-Samara'e did not effectively lobby for a MoSWA budget increase for her proposed programs. According to Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim, other ministers noted her singular focus on female detainees, rather than on women's issues in general. Whereas Al-Samara'e may have had good intentions, her political inexperience and perceived negative attitude likely

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were contributing factors to her failure to assert herself and gain GOI support. We have also heard -- and this is only speculation at this point -- that the MoSWA may be merged into the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA). End Comment.

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